

A breeding attempt by Spangled Drongos at Shortland – the first for the Hunter Region

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This note describes a failed breeding attempt by a pair of Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus* at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, Shortland (32.875°S 151.697°E) during December 2025 and January 2026. The pair built a nest in December, which was first reported on 20 December 2025 by an eBird observer (Berrier 2025). **Figure 1** shows an adult visiting the nest and **Figure 2** shows the nest with an incubating bird. However, on 20 January 2026 the nest was found to have been partially destroyed, and the eggs were gone (P. Lightfoot pers. comm.). Based on the condition of the nest and the ambient weather in the lead-up to the discovery of partial destruction, it is considered likely that the eggs were taken by a predator.

The nest was about 5 m above ground, suspended in a fork in a Spotted Gum *Corymbia maculata*. It was constructed entirely of Spanish Moss *Tillandsia usneoides* and cladodes from Swamp Oak *Casuarina glauca*. As is typical of Spangled Drongo nests, when an incubating bird is not present, the contents could be seen, and it was confirmed that three eggs were being incubated. The eggs were being incubated by both adults.

The breeding attempt, although ultimately unsuccessful, is significant for several reasons:

- Spangled Drongos are mainly a late summer through to spring migrant to the Hunter Region, with few December or January records, particularly in the south of the Region (Williams 2025);
- There are no known breeding records for Spangled Drongos in the Hunter Region (Williams 2025);
- The most southerly regular breeding sites in Australia are along the Far North Coast, with Macksville generally considered to be the usual southern limit

(Mo *et al.* 2017). However, there is a breeding record from near Port Macquarie (Cooper *et al.* 2020). Macksville is about 270 km north of Shortland, with four major river catchments in between (Karuah, Manning, Hastings and Macleay), whilst Port Macquarie is about 200 km north.

The observed breeding behaviour was consistent with that described for birds on the central Queensland coast (Briggs 2016) and elsewhere (BirdLife Australia 2023).



Figure 1. One of the Spangled Drongos attending the nest at Shortland (photo: D. Atkinson).



Figure 2. One of the Spangled Drongos sitting on the nest at Shortland (photo: M. Roderick).

It is generally accepted that Spangled Drongos which migrate to southerly parts of NSW are a population of subspecies *bracteatus*, which breeds further north and which migrates southwards after its breeding season has finished (Wood 2012). Subspecies *atrabeatus* is the only other subspecies occurring in eastern Australia but it usually moves northwards after the breeding season, towards New Guinea. If the pair at Shortland was of the subspecies *bracteatus*, which seems likely, we suggest two possible explanations: they either migrated prior to the breeding season, or the breeding range for Spangled Drongo is expanding southwards (e.g. due to climate change). A change in migration behaviour cannot be excluded but it seems unlikely and we note that Spangled Drongos were recorded at the Wetlands Centre regularly from July (mid-winter) onwards (i.e. not a migratory pattern change). Circumstantial evidence supporting the theory of a breeding range expansion is a record in March 2026 from Earthcare Park (32.750°S 151.615°E) near Tenambit, of two adult Spangled Drongos with two immature birds (<https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/survey?id=10529618&h=394a8024>). The latter were identified as immature because they had brown irises (M. Clarke/R. Smith pers. comm.). As the immature birds were already fledged, their nesting site might not have been in the Tenambit area, but it seems unlikely that it would have been hundreds of kilometres away (i.e. the nest was considered likely to have been within the Hunter Region)..

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